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A Comparative Study of EFL Grammar Competence between the HSC and Alim Level Students in Bangladesh

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Abstract: Each education level in Bangladesh places a high value on teaching English grammar as one of the most important language skills. This study compares the EFL grammar proficiency of Bangladeshi students studying in the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) program with that of the Alim level students. The researcher gathered test scripts of 50 HSC level students and 50 Alim level students in order to evaluate and determine whether the grammar lessons given by EFL teachers are more effective for HSC level students or Alim level students. The researcher employed 'error analysis' to examine grammatical errors in their writing, calculate how they affect English sentences, and determine how to fix or enhance performance. The researcher found that Bangladeshi students, both at the HSC and Alim levels, are not proficient in English grammar. The majority of students from HSC and Alim levels struggle to understand basics of English grammar like subject-verb agreement, tense usage etc. As grammar help writers express their thoughts clearly and persuasively while maintaining professionalism and credibility, the teachers as well as the students of both stream of education should work hard on this particular skill of English language.

Keywords: EFL, grammar, competency, higher secondary certificate, Alim

Introduction

Since grammar gives communication the structure it needs, it is a crucial part of learning a language (Ajaj, 2022). Grammar instructions for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can be enjoyable and difficult at the same time (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011). However, grammar has traditionally focused nearly entirely on sentence-level analysis (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Therefore, it can be said that grammar describes the rules that determine how sentences are constructed in a language (Whong et al., 2013). According to the linguists, one of the most important aspects of acquiring a second language is being able to both recognize and construct well-formed sentences (Kaçani & Mangelli, 2013). Both words and texts have grammar in the sense that they are arranged according to certain principles, although it's not always obvious where sentence grammar ends and word grammar or text grammar starts (Whong et al., 2013). However, for the sake of this study, the researcher will take the term grammar to imply grammar at the sentence level because the majority of language education course materials and grammars are still firmly based in the sentence grammar tradition.

In Bangladesh, the national curriculum, the exam-focused educational system, and the overall emphasis on preparing students for board exams and future academic or professional requirements all have an impact on the teaching of EFL grammar at the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and Alim levels (Sultana, 2024). The grammatical themes that students at the HSC and Alim levels must know are specified by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). The main emphasis is on basic and practical grammar, which is in line with making sure that writing and speaking are

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grammatically correct and getting students ready to do well on tests, especially those that have a lot of grammar (Ahmed, 2013). Hence, to prepare students for the grammar sections of the HSC and Alim English exams, grammar instruction at this level is mostly exam-focused (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). Knowledge of prepositions, articles, and verb forms are among the main grammatical topics tested on the tests, which also demand that students use grammar rules on their own (Sultana, 2017). This level of grammar also covers recognizing and fixing grammatical errors in sentences, changing between different sentence forms (such as affirmative to negative, complex to simple), switching between direct and indirect speech, using verbs appropriately depending on the sentence context, and more (Rahman et al., 2019).

The study aims to present a comparative picture of academic grammar proficiency amongst Bangladeshi students at the HSC and Alim levels. The academic standards of the HSC and Alim Level are identical in the national educational system. The qualifications needed to teach English at these two levels are identical, as are the English textbooks. The distribution of English marks at the HSC and Alim levels is also nearly identical. Each level of English carries 200 marks. The test items of these two levels, of course, are nearly identical as well. However, the academic environment in madrassas differs from that of the general educational institutions where Alim and HSC level students are taught respectively, and the Arabic language and certain religious subjects are overemphasized at the Alim level. It is feasible that learners' English language outcomes will differ in this situation. Therefore, a comparative study examining their level of grammar proficiency is quite important.

Literature Review

Over the past fifty years, English teachers in Bangladesh have taught grammar using a variety of techniques (Sultana, 2024). However, the academics have often questioned whether the use of various instructional methods has been successful (Ahmed, 2013). There hasn't been a set language education policy in Bangladesh from the start of the independent educational system after liberation (Patwary et al., 2023). Frequently, it has changed in accordance with the wishes of the ruling class (Rahman and Pandian, 2018). Many EFL teachers and students today place more emphasis on fluency than accuracy because to the continuous changes in curricula and textbooks; they believe that conveying the message is more important than using proper grammar (Tahmina, 2023). Besides, grammar instruction has not been adequately covered by the curriculum, and the testing and evaluation procedures are subpar (Rahman et al., 2019). Passing the test is more important than really learning the language, and hence, students do not study grammar with pleasure (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Consequently, teachers cannot employ engaging or captivating teaching methods when teaching grammar to their students. Some experts believe that grammar instruction should incorporate extracurricular activities like grammatical games, role-playing, proper English speaking and listening, English-language movie viewing, simulations, etc. (Briggs & Pailliotet, 1997). Regretfully, these extracurricular activities are very difficult to be organized by the majority of English teachers in Bangladesh (Rahman and Pandian, 2018). Instructors' lack of training and the usage of traditional teaching techniques are two other significant factors contributing to instructors' and students' lack of awareness and enthusiasm in teaching and studying English grammar (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that EFL teachers at the HSC and Alim levels have not been able to select the best method for teaching EFL grammar to their students (Ahmed, 2013). Students' limited exposure to the English language, teachers' ignorance of effective teaching strategies, and the educational system's heavy reliance on test scores rather than students' growth in language creativity are some of the factors contributing to students' low language proficiency (Ullah, 2016). At this level, the exam-oriented EFL education system leaves most teachers with little option but to help students get ready for the tests (e.g., learners practicing copying and memorizing particular genres of language items instead of experiencing the actual process of language use

because it clearly takes a lot of time and effort for both teachers and learners) (Patwary et al., 2023). As a result, most teachers choose to use the simplest method of teaching grammar—for example, giving students model structures to copy and memorize—because they are overwhelmed by the pressure to do well on tests. Studies also reveal that EFL grammar teachers in Bangladesh deal with numerous difficulties (Kabir & Saad, 2020). A number of common issues, such as big class sizes, students' poor linguistic backgrounds, the format of public exams, a lack of resources for teacher training, and others, make it difficult to teach and learn grammar in colleges and madrassas (Islam et al., 2022). Based on the research and discussion above, it can be concluded that Bangladeshi teachers fail to properly teach English grammar using the interactive technique. While reviewing the literatures, the researcher observed that there are numerous studies in this area since grammar is essential to teaching and learning English. However, few studies have compared the grammar proficiency of students at the HSC and Alim levels. From this perspective, the research could contribute to this specific field's body of knowledge.

Methodology

In this study, the researcher conducted an intensive review of the examination related documents pertaining to the writing section of the HSC syllabus. One hundred answer scripts; 50 from the HSC level and another 50 from Alim level were collected to evaluate the writing sections to find out the effectiveness of the grammar instructions of the teachers in EFL classes. The scripts were from the test examination of English paper-1 and paper-2 of the students in the respective institutions. The English examinations contain many direct grammar topics, but the researcher selected some written items from the scripts to evaluate grammar mistakes in the students' written pieces. From the written topics, the researcher selected letter, report, paragraph and essay. For answer scripts evaluation, an answer scripts analysis guidelines and checklist was prepared based on the principles and guide lines by Nunan, (2003). Based on the guidelines and principles a Self-Made Rubric was designed to evaluate the writings of the students from both the levels the following rubric was designed. The purpose of the rubrics is to find out the effectiveness of the instruction by the teachers in EFL writing classes. For this study, the researchers evaluated the writing scripts of both the HSC and Alim level students, identified their common grammatical errors, categorized the errors into different themes and then tabulated them based on the frequency of the same error. Thus, the researcher used quantitative approach for data analysis. The results were interpreted and analyzed using frequency counting and percentage and presented the common errors made by students while writing on their topics from the writing section of their syllabus. The researcher conducted the model of Nawir et al. (2019) for analyzing the frequency of error in writing.

Findings

Following nearly two years of instruction, students take tests (Test Examination) administered by the institutions and madrashas. The researcher gathered and examined 50 test exam scripts from colleges and 50 test exam scripts from madrassas in order to determine the effect of EFL grammar instructions. Only the written portions of the scripts were taken into consideration as data by the researcher. Reading (thorough examination), interpreting, and skimming (superficial inspection) were all used in the examination script analysis process. During the analysis procedure, the researcher categorized the data according to the main goal of the study. The procedures consisted of scanning the data carefully, reading it again, and reviewing it. In order to identify themes relevant to a phenomenon, the researcher closely examined the chosen grammatical errors and carried out coding and category development based on the errors' characteristics. In the next sections, the analysis's insights are shown.

Findings of the Errors Related to Mechanics

The structure of spoken or written language is known as grammar. It alludes to the components of speech and how sentences are put together using them. The rules of the written language, including spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, are referred to as mechanics. To effectively convey the ideas, we have in a paper, we must have a solid grasp of grammar and mechanics. To put it briefly, the cornerstones of good writing are grammar and mechanics. They support authors in presenting their ideas in a clear, convincing manner while upholding their professionalism and authority. Grammar and mechanics are related because they both promote logical sentence construction, readability, and clarity. Therefore, the researcher attempted to investigate the students' mistakes with sentence mechanics as well.

Table 1. Analyses of the Errors in Sentence Mechanics

Mechanics	Scripts	Frequency (student)	Percentage (Student)
Wrong Spelling	HSC level	32	64%
	Alim level	34	68%
Wrong Punctuation	HSC level	30	60%
	Alim level	32	64%
Wrong Capitalization	HSC level	25	50%
	Alim level	27	54%

Sentence mechanic is very important for writing a standard sentence. The table (table-1) shows that 64% (frequency-32) of HSC level students and 68% (frequency-34) of Alim level students have made many mistakes in spelling. The following sentences are some examples of wrong use of mechanics made by the students in writing.

Student-1 (HSC): Regular move ment of our bods is Physical Exercise. **(Topic- Physical Exercise)**
Student-2 (HSC): We can notthing of a sound mind without a sound health. **(Topic- Physical Exercise)**
Student-3 (Alim): Food adulte ration quality of food items and coses health hazards. **(Topic- Food Adulteration)**
Student-4 (Alim): They use pestisides with fish and preservedwith formaline. **(Topic- Food Adulteration)**

Table 1 has also shown that a lot of students of both levels have not used punctuations properly. 60% (frequency-30) of HSC level students and 64% (frequency-32) of Alim level students have not used punctuation perfectly in their EFL writing. However, in case of capitalization, the students of both levels have performed better. In some of the sentences, the students of both levels have used wrong punctuation and wrong capitalizations have been given below.

Student-1 (HSC): As a result the water of the sea level is rising, gradually. **(Wrong punctuation)**
Student-2 (HSC): For solving this problem and to lead a happy life we should stop environment pollution. **(Wrong punctuation)**
Student-3 (HSC): Those, who loves his/her country hopes for the country called the patriot. **(Wrong punctuation)**
Student-4 (HSC): The name of our country is Bangladesh. **(Wrong capitalization)**
Student-5 (Alim): Although they work hard they earn a little. (Wrong punctuation)
Student-6 (Alim): However everyone should possess the virtue of patriotism. **(Wrong punctuation)**
Student-7 (Alim): Mr. Rahman, a father of a College going boy express his opinion. **(Wrong capitalization)**
Student-8 (Alim): It is important for students life. **(No apostrophe)**

Findings of the Errors Related to Grammar

For this study, the researcher evaluated (corrected) the written pieces of the students in the exam scripts, identified their common grammatical errors, categorized the errors into different grammatical themes and then tabulated them based on the frequency of the same error. Thus, they used both quantitative and qualitative approaches for data analysis. The results were interpreted and analyzed using frequency counting and percentage (descriptive statistics; that is quantitative approach) and the discussion was presented using the common grammatical errors made by students while writing their paragraphs in English as examples (that is qualitative approach). In this study, appropriate focus was given to the analysis of general or common grammatical errors (tenses, voices, prepositions, articles, adjectives and adverbs) that students made in their written paragraphs. As a stepwise process, the researchers identified the aforementioned errors via correcting students'

written paragraphs, categorized the errors, counted each category for frequency, tabulated and changed the errors supporting it by sample examples from the written paragraphs. The overall results and discussions are presented below:

Table 2. Analyses of Grammatical Errors in Writing

Grammar	Scripts	Frequency (Student)	Percentage (Student)
Sentence Fragment	HSC level	40	80%
	Alim level	42	84%
Lack of Sub-Verb agreement	HSC level	37	76%
	Alim level	39	78%
Run-on sentence	HSC level	32	64%
	Alim level	35	70%
Lack of Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement	HSC Level	34	68%
	Alim Level	35	70%
Lack of Clear Pronoun Reference	HSC Level	36	72%
	Alim Level	37	74%
Shift in Pronoun	HSC Level	33	66%
	Alim Level	36	72%
Shift in Verb Tense	HSC Level	36	72%
	Alim Level	38	76%
Incorrect Verb or tense Form	HSC Level	36	72%
	Alim Level	39	78%
Misplaced Modifier	HSC Level	38	76%
	Alim Level	40	80%

The table shows that majority of the students studying at both levels have made a lot of grammatical mistakes in their writing. 80% (frequency-40) of HSC level students and 84% (frequency-42) of Alim level students have used sentence fragment in their writing. On the other hand, 76% (frequency-38) of HSC level students and 78% (frequency-39) of Alim level students are unable to use subject-verb agreement correctly in their writing. 64% (frequency-32) of HSC level students and 70% (frequency-35) of Alim level students have used run-on sentences in their writing. Besides, 68% (frequency-34) of HSC level students and 70% (frequency-35) of Alim level students cannot maintain pronoun-antecedents agreement while writing their paragraphs. Similarly, shift in pronoun and verb-tense have been found in the writing of majority of students of both HSC and Alim level. 66% (frequency-33) and 72% (frequency-36) of HSC level students and 72% (frequency-36) and 76% (frequency-38) of Alim level students have not used pronoun and verb-tense correctly. The researcher has also found from the table that incorrect tense form is another mistake that has been made by the both level of students frequently in their writing. 72% (frequency-36) of HSC level students and 78% (frequency-39) of Alim level students have used wrong tense form of the verbs in writing sentences. The students of both levels have also used the modifiers wrongly in writing. 76% (frequency-38) of the HSC level students and 80% (frequency-40) of Alim level students' writings show misplaced modifier in their sentences. Some of the sentences containing wrong grammar written by both group of students have been given below:

Student-1 (HSC) - Students go to social service. They serve People (**Run-on)**
Student-2 (HSC) - We love social service we all like it very much. (**Run-on)**
Student-3 (Alim) - We need to take fresh food cannot do that. **(Run-on)**
Student-4 (Alim) - We are not paying attention, we are taking bad food. **(Run-on)**
Student-5 (HSC) - Because food loses its purity. **(Fragment)**
Student-6 (HSC) – Recently, we have found melamine. A poisonous chemical is a milk powder. **(Fragment)**
Student-7 (Alim) – Unless we go for social service. **(Fragment)**
Student-8 (Alim) - Before go to social service. we need preparation. **(Fragment)**
Student-9 (HSC) - A complex system of roads link Dhaka city. **(Lack of Subject-verb agreement)**
Student-10 (HSC) - The sounds of the traffic creates problem. **(Lack of Subject-verb agreement)**
Student-11(Alim) - Our team have won the game. **(Lack of Subject-verb agreement)**
Student-12 (Alim) - He gave me two thousand taka which were enough for me **(Lack of Subject-verb agreement)**
Student-13 (HSC) - A lawyer must protect his client. **(Lack of pronoun - antecedent agreement)**

Student-14 (Alim)- Istiak drinks milk daily because it supplies you calcium. **(Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement)**
Student-15 (HSC) - The players played; which we enjoyed. **(Unclear pronoun reference)**
Student-16 (Alim) - When he gave his father the book, he became very happy. **(Unclear pronoun reference)**
Student-17 (HSC) - Last Saturday night I go to meet him. **(Incorrect verb tense)**
Student-18 (HSC) - They have been eradicated illiteracy in our country. **(Incorrect verb form)**
Student-19 (Alim) - Many people has done it together. **(Incorrect verb form)**
Student-20 (Alim) - This is the third time our team have win the trophy. **(Incorrect verb form)**
Student-21 (HSC): Hanging on the wall, Rony saw his picture. **(Misplaced Modifier)**
Student-22 (Alim): We only ordered vegetable for our dinner. **(Misplaced Modifier)**

Discussion

This study intended to find out effectiveness of the grammar instructions of the EFL teachers on both HSC and Alim level of students by evaluating their writing. The researcher has compared the frequency of the grammatical errors in writing of two groups of students; one group is from HSC level and another group is from Alim level. From the comparison of the writing scores, it has been seen that the writing performance from the perspective of grammatical competence of the students of both groups is almost same. However, the total performance of the HSC level students is slightly better in English grammar than that of the performance of the Alim level students. Nonetheless, the researcher has found through their examination scripts analyses that students of both levels have made similar types of grammatical mistakes frequently in their writing sections. So, the percentage and frequency of making mistakes for a particular error are almost same for both levels of students. The study shows that most of the students of both groups have failed to write grammatically sound sentences in their writing. It is known that grammar, the structure of written or spoken language, refers to the parts of speech and how they combine together to form sentences (Briggs & Pailliotet, 1997). An understanding of both grammars is required to clearly communicate ideas in a paper (Daskan, 2023). Proper grammar helps convey ideas accurately, reducing the chance of misinterpretation (Fitori, 2019). Without correct punctuation or sentence structure, a message can become confusing or misleading (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2003). Well-written work reflects intelligence and attention to detail (Folse, 2016). Errors in grammar and mechanics can make writing seem careless, affecting the writer's credibility, especially in academic, business, and professional settings (Ajaj, 2022). Good grammar and mechanics create smooth, engaging writing. Proper punctuation, sentence structure, and word usage make it easier for readers to follow along without struggling to understand the meaning (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2003). Whether writing an essay, article, or business proposal, strong grammar enhances persuasion (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011e). Clear and polished writing strengthens arguments, making them more compelling and impactful (Daskan, 2023). Poor grammar can lead to misunderstandings. For example, incorrect punctuation can change a sentence's meaning entirely ("Let's eat, Grandma" vs. "Let's eat Grandma") (Kaçani & Mangelli, 2013). Mastery of grammar allows writers to experiment with style and structure while maintaining coherence (Whong et al., 2013). Writers who understand the rules can break them intentionally for artistic or rhetorical effect. In short, grammar and mechanics are the foundation of effective writing (Kumayas & Lengkoan, 2023). They help writers express their thoughts clearly and persuasively while maintaining professionalism and credibility ((Rahman et al., 2019). However, according to this study, the majority of students struggle to understand basic English grammar concepts like subject-verb agreement and tense usage. It is evident that even if English grammar is taught in schools in Bangladesh from a young age to guarantee that students are familiar with grammatical structures; their proficiency does not advance that much. Students at the HSC and Alim levels appear to frequently memorize the rules of grammar, because English is a mandatory subject in their public exams. Because of this over-reliance on memorization, many students find it difficult to use grammar in practical application. They even struggle with tense usage, as they have been seen to frequently make mistakes in the present perfect vs past simple and future tenses while writing in English language. Besides, incorrect usage of prepositions and omission of articles (a, an, the) are

frequent mistakes noticed in their writing. In using subject-verb agreement in complex sentences, the students' written simple sentences are usually correct, but errors appear in complex structures. It can be inferred from the findings that Bangladeshi students, both at the HSC and Alim levels, are not proficient in English grammar. The absence of grammar understanding might lead the learners to many consequences in academic, professional, and social contexts. Their writing of essays, reports, and assignments is impacted by mistakes in sentence structure, tense, and punctuation. Frequent grammatical errors in their English board exams result in poorer grades because they cause the examiners to misunderstand the written texts.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it can be said that developing learners' grammar skills in Bangladesh requires a mix of traditional and modern teaching methods, considering the local education system, language exposure, and students' needs. The following additional actions could be taken:

a) EFL Teachers in Bangladesh should teach grammar in meaningful contexts rather than isolated rules. They should use real-life examples from students' daily lives.
b) EFL teachers can use fun grammar games like "Grammar Bingo," "Sentence Scramble," and "Fill in the Blanks" to engage students. Besides, they can encourage students to create and act out short stories using target grammar structures.
c) EFL teachers can use platforms like Duolingo, Grammarly, and British Council's Learn English for interactive grammar exercises. They can provide access to grammar tutorials from renowned educators through YouTube & Online platforms.
d) By arranging Grammar Workshops and training for Teachers, the authorities can equip teachers with modern techniques for grammar instruction. Besides, schools and madrassas should update their curriculum with more practical grammar applications.

Conclusion

This study highlighted a clear scenario of Bangladeshi HSC and Alim students' proficiency with English grammar. The research found that Bangladeshi students' proficiency in English grammar is quite low. When writing in English, students frequently make basic grammar errors. Although students are expected to acquire a strong foundation in rule-based grammar, they frequently struggle to integrate grammar into communicative and real-world tasks. The efficiency of teaching EFL grammar at the HSC and Alim levels can be greatly increased by striking a balance between exam preparation and an emphasis on practical skills.

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